

Love Poured Out
Mark 14:1-11
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
May 16, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

Do you remember *Mad Libs*? That's the zany party game that was invented in 1953 by Leonard Stern and Roger Price. In *Mad Libs*, one player has a short story with several key words missing. That player asks the other to fill in the missing words, and generally, if there are enough pre-teens involved, it's a lot of fun. Let's try it. *[items below in italics were suggested in worship on 5/16/2010]*

One day, the *Dave Carver* (last name of someone in the room) family went to church. They got there at *noon* (time of day). They were really surprised to see that *Glenn* and *Jason* (people in the room) were there too, and they said, *OH!* (exclamation!). Pastor Dave preached a sermon that was *a century* (length of time) long, and it was really *purple* (adjective). The music, however, was *fuzzy* (adjective). After church, everyone went to the back of the room where they served *France* (noun) and *tubas* (noun) to everyone.

The joy of *Mad Libs*, of course, is that they are always different. You can't come up with the same story more than once, because the people in the room are different. The basic story may stay the same, but each time, the details shift.

I am thinking about *Mad Libs* today because we have arrived at a portion of Mark's gospel wherein Mark tells a story about the life of Jesus – and it's a story that is told, in one way or another, not only by Mark, but by Matthew, Luke, and John. And each of the Gospels uses this incident for slightly different purposes...and in doing so, each author filters the information slightly.

The basic story is this: One day, Jesus went to dinner at the home of _____ (name a friend of Jesus). This person was a _____ (adjective). While he was there, _____ (person in the room) poured oil on his _____ (body part). _____ (person or people in the room) were irritated by that, saying that it

was a waste of money. Jesus defended the person. And the writer of the gospel used that incident in Jesus' life to say _____ (name a theological point).

I'm not saying that the gospels contradict each other – only that they have different information. So let's look at the story in Mark. Where was the dinner? At Simon's home. What do we know about Simon? He was a leper – an outcast. Who poured oil on Jesus? An unnamed woman. Where did she pour it? On his head. Who was irritated? Some people. What's the point? She is preparing me for my death. There's more to it than that, but take a look and see how the other writers treat the same story:

	Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
Where was it?	Simon's house	Simon's house	Simon's house	A house
	Leper	Leper	Pharisee	--
Who poured oil?	A woman	A woman	A sinful woman	Mary
Where?	Jesus' head	Jesus' head	Jesus' feet	Jesus' feet
Who was angry?	"some"	The disciples	The Pharisees	Judas
What's the point?	Preparing for Jesus' death; woman is example for others	Preparing for Jesus' death; woman is example for others	Great forgiveness calls for great gratitude	Contrast faith of Mary & Martha with sin of Judas

Do you see what I mean? Nobody is saying that Simon couldn't be both a Pharisee and a Leper; and of course "some" were irritated, that could mean the disciples, the Pharisees, or Judas, or everyone – there's nothing contradictory here...it's just an opportunity for us to hear the different emphases of the gospel writers.

And, since we're focusing on Mark, let's take a look at how

Mark uses this incident to challenge us.

First, let me point out that this is another example of a “Marcan sandwich”, where Jesus seems to take one idea and interrupt it with something else – and in the meantime, he uses the “filling” to comment on the “bread” and vice versa.

Our reading for today starts off with a story about the people who are Jesus’ enemies. They want to kill him – but they are afraid, and so they decide that they’re going to have to wait until after the Passover is finished, after the pilgrims leave town, and after all of the reporters from the out of town newspapers have gone back home. His enemies appear, at least for now, powerless.

Then there’s the “filling” of the sandwich – the story of the woman who anoints Jesus – who treats him as anything but an enemy. More about that in a moment.

The “sandwich” ends with the account of Judas, who ought to have been a friend to Jesus, choosing to act with the enemies. In fact, Judas provides the enemies with such promising intelligence that they revise their plan to wait and decide that they can kill Jesus sooner, rather than later. So you see the sandwich? A story about a person who loves and honors Jesus surrounded by stories about people who act with malice towards Jesus. Whatever the woman does is amplified and intensified when it comes into contrast with the behavior of the religious leaders and Judas, doesn’t it?

So does she do? Well, she pours oil on his head. And this isn’t olive oil, or Vaseline intensive care...this is pure nard – imported from India. As Mark points out, it wasn’t cheap – three hundred denarii would have been an entire year’s salary for a laborer.

What’s the point of the oil? You’ve already heard one echo from the Old Testament – when Aaron and his sons were set apart for the priesthood, God told Moses to pour oil on them – it was a means by which these people were set apart as having a unique position between God and other humans. Other passages in the Old Testament speak of pouring oil on the head of the man

God had called to be the King – again, a way of pointing to a special role and special responsibility that would be undertaken. *The Song of Solomon* has several passages wherein pouring oil on the head of another is linked to an intense love for that other. Lastly, oil such as nard was used by those in grief to anoint the dead and prepare them for burial.

Mark uses this incident to point to the fact that a woman whose name and past didn't matter came to Jesus in love and gave all she had to prepare him for the special role that he was assuming as he looked towards the cross. Jesus was the ultimate priest who came to bring God and humans together. And he is the King in that he proclaims the kingdom of Heaven. He is loved. And the way in which he would express his priesthood, his kingship, and his love was through his death. Pouring a pound of nard on this man at this time is an exquisite statement of faith.

And note, too, the way that she performed this act. If it's me, and I've got an incredibly valuable ointment to share with the Lord, then I take the container and I open it carefully and I veeerrrrrry gingerly take out this liquid gold. But what does she do? She breaks the container – there is no way that she can save this oil, even if she wanted to – because the container won't hold it any more. Again, I think that Mark uses that little detail to prepare us for Jesus' death – just as the woman's treatment of the container shows us her total commitment to giving her best to Jesus, so Jesus' bodily death shows us his total commitment to the reconciling work that God has given him to do. For this woman, and for Jesus, there is no going back.

When the people in the room challenge this woman and her priorities, Jesus responds simply by saying that from now on, whenever people hear the good news, they will hear about what this woman has done. This story, he says, will be told in memory of her. It is a memorial.

Let's think about memorials for a moment. If we were to drive four or five hours, we could get to the District of Columbia, where we would be able to see the Washington Monument. You know it, right? Big, towering beautiful edifice built to...to what? To

memorialize George Washington. It's there so that we don't forget that he lived, and what a huge presence he had. It is, in some ways, a very backward-looking memorial – like many monuments are. They exist to remind us of something that happened.

A couple of hours outside of DC, near Somerset, PA, we'd find the Flight 93 Memorial – still being built – that honors the passengers and crew who were on Flight 93 on September 11, 2001 – men and women who died taking heroic action in order to thwart a plot to kill thousands of people.

I would suggest that there is a difference between the Washington Monument and the Flight 93 National Memorial. The first, as I've said, points us to a great man, the likes of which we may never see again. The second, however, calls each of us to remember the lives of those who died by seeking to be brave and heroic in whatever places we may find ourselves. The first looks back at one man. The second invites us to consider how we ourselves might lead lives that are heroic in some way.

When Jesus says that this act is a memorial to the woman, it has to be the second. Mark doesn't tell us her name. We don't know anything about her from Mark – because for Mark, the point is not that once upon a time this amazing woman did something really cool for Jesus. The point is that every day, ordinary people like you and I have the opportunity to bring our best to the Lord and in pouring that best out before him, acknowledge that he is the king; that he is the way to life.

And maybe you say, "Yeah, sure, Pastor Dave, that sounds great...but the truth is that you and I both know that I don't have a 'best' to offer. Sure, the woman in scripture had a pound of nard. I don't. Some people have great gifts of finances, or talent, or energy...but I'm not that guy. I don't have anything worth giving."

Listen: Jesus didn't say that everyone has to pour out a year's salary in perfume. Why did the woman offer up her nard? Because that's what she had. That was her best. You have a best.

I know that you don't have the same energy as the person

sitting next to you. And you don't have the same financial situation as the person sitting in front of you. And you don't have the same family life as the people across the room. If we think of "best" and think only of quantity – we are in trouble. Remember the widow from a couple of weeks ago? Her best was two cents. But it was her best. I know, to me, it paled in comparison to a year's worth of salary. But it made quite an impression on Jesus.

It is not a question of whether or not you have a best – it is a question of how you will choose to allocate the best energy, the best love, the best patience, the best financial choices, the best of your time...Sure, you don't have as much time as you wish you did. But you have time. How will you use it?

And further, it's not as if you can simply choose to not do anything with whatever you have that is "best". Because you will pour it out somewhere. You may give the best years of your life to the garden, or to the food pantry, or to your children, or to the Steelers. You may give the best of your income to the tax man, or to the Lord, or to the man who sold you your Maserati, or to the credit card company.

Jesus took his best and poured it out, and brought life eternal and God's kingdom on earth. The un-named woman took her best and poured it out and acknowledged Jesus as Lord and King and worthy of ultimate love. When Jesus' friend Judas took his love for Jesus and sold that love to the religious leaders, they gave him 30 pieces of silver. Within a week, he had returned to those leaders and threw the money at their feet, saying he couldn't live with it. Then he killed himself, and the money was used to buy a cemetery. You see? Everybody has a best, and everybody pours out their best. The question is, what are you doing with your best? Are you pouring out in love, in hope, in life, in the hopes that the world will change as a result of you giving what God has given you? Or are you dropping the best that God has given you in places that will ultimately perish?

I started this sermon with a *Mad Lib*. It seems to me that every day, you and I are given the chance to fill in a lot of the blanks. Sure, some of the story is already written for us. But

there's plenty of opportunity for you and me to choose the route that the story takes. How will you write yours? What will you do with the best that you have?

My hope is that you and I will choose to live as memorials that point others to the love and friendship that is found in Jesus Christ – that the choices we make with the resources we have will be full of life and wisdom and faith and hope. In the name of the one who was, and who is, and who is to come, Amen.